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SUBJECT: TRANSITION UNDERWAY IN YESHA COUNCIL

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, per reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The settlers' Yesha Council is in transition following the late November election of candidates from outside the traditional settlement pioneer leaders. Settler pioneers Benzi Lieberman and Pinchas Wallerstein are finishing their terms in office, having been accused of "losing the movement" after Gaza disengagement. In a series of meetings with PolOff since the elections, settlers have said they hope to improve their own lives and distance themselves from the GOI, with whom they say settlement leaders have been too close, in anticipation of future evacuations. End Summary.

Yesha Council Elections

¶2. (C) The Yesha (Hebrew acronym for "Judea, Samaria, and Gaza") Council has been the premier settlers' political movement since the 1970's. It has undergone significant changes since the GOI disengaged from Gaza and four settlements in the northern West Bank in 2005 and dismantled the West Bank outpost of Amona in 2006. On November 27, settlers elected regional council heads in Samaria and Binyamin, the two largest of the four West Bank regional councils. Leadership elections for regional councils are held every four years, and the Samaria, Binyamin, Gush Etzion, and Hebron Chairs comprise the Yesha Council officers who select the Council's chair and deputy chair. (Comment: The contemporaneous meeting in Annapolis overshadowed these elections, which received limited press coverage, but were important among the settlers. End Comment.)

¶3. (C) Northern West Bank settlers have told PolOff in a series of meetings since late November that the elections focused on "potholes and trash pick-up," not big political issues. They said in both elections, the "establishment" candidates, who were proteges of incumbent settler leaders associated with the movement's post-1967 founding, lost to popular locals with little experience in public office or connection to national Israeli politics. Settler media called the election a victory of "sandals over loafers". Settlers say the results are a message to Israeli politicians, to whom their former leaders were too close.

¶4. (C) Settlers from across the West Bank have told PolOff in a number of meetings that they blame the Yesha Council for not preventing the 2005-6 evacuations, recalling that the Council did not support the calls of settler rabbis for IDF soldiers to refuse orders to evacuate Jews from Gaza. Settlers underscored to PolOff the "continued suffering" of Gush Katif evacuees and said they will use all available means to avoid future evacuations, including calling for soldiers to refuse orders and possibly violence. They have repeatedly said the old guard leadership was too close to Israeli politicians and blamed that relationship for a

political deal on the Gaza evacuation and for their loss of trust.

Former Pioneers

15. (C) On the last day of his ten years' leading the Samaria Regional Council, Benzi Lieberman told PolOff that he has "had enough" and will return to Tel Aviv. (Note: He headed the Yesha Council for six of the ten years. End Note). Lieberman said the Yesha Council still "speaks for 80 percent of the settlers." However, settler Mel Borenstein from Elkana (Northern West Bank) told PolOff that Lieberman "lost the movement" after the evacuations, and destroyed his own credibility and the Yesha Council's. He criticized Lieberman and old guard Yesha leaders for focusing on settlement building ("actions over words") and failing to build a constituency inside Israel. He noted that only twenty percent of Israelis have visited the West Bank. Pinchas Wallerstein, Binyamin Regional Council's outgoing chairman and Yesha pioneer added to PolOff that the Yesha's chief objective now should be to persuade mainstream Israelis of the importance of their cause.

16. (C) Shimon Riklin, founder of Migron outpost, told PolOff that settler voters wanted real technocrats, capable of providing services and improving infrastructure, education, and health care, not leaders "who are friendly with Jerusalem politicians." He said the Yesha abandoned settlers at Gush Katif, but the 2005-6 evacuations served settlers' interests by demonstrating that IDF violence against fellow Israelis (settlers) is "pointless." Riklin added that the next confrontation with the GOI will likely be at Migron and "far more violent" than Amona.

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Comment

17. (C) The electoral loss of settler pioneers and the election of non-traditional, locally focused leaders to the Yesha Council indicates that settlers have completed a political transition since the Gush Katif evacuations from Gaza. In numerous meetings, settlers told PolOff that they "feel like political pawns," who were "deceived and misled" at Gush Katif by a GOI that "incentivized and encouraged" their movement for nearly forty years. They said they are now setting out with new leaders who are free from obligations or connections to politicians in Israel. Many also say they are prepared to engage in violent and ugly resistance if tested.

WALLES